

Exegetical Analysis of Ephesians 2:1-10

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Contents

A Summary of Paul’s Argument Regarding Salvation.....	1
Ephesians 2:1-3 – The Previous Life.....	2
Ephesians 2:4-7 – Raised to New Life.....	3
Ephesians 2:8-10 – Saved by Grace, Created for Good Works.....	4
Conclusion.....	6
Bibliography.....	7

The passage at hand, Ephesians 2:1-10, serves as a critical text in establishing the foundations of salvation, and the working of God and the responsibility of man. Paul compares the previous life of the Ephesian believers with the new life in Christ and explains how they have come to know the reality of spiritual life in Christ, and what the benefits of this life are. He plainly lays the doctrine of salvation out in plain terms, revealing that Christ is the one who procured and provided salvation, and that the Ephesians are beneficiaries of this great grace, not because they earned it, but because they received the gift by faith. Paul's primary argument is that God is the One who has made them alive in Christ, not themselves through works. In this new life, believers are given purpose to walk in good works. In other words, Paul argues that believers are not saved by their good works, but they are saved *unto* good works. He asserts that man obtains salvation through an act of faith as opposed to works, and this by God's grace, according to the work of Christ; further, man is recreated in Christ not by good works, but for good works.

A Summary of Paul's Argument Regarding Salvation

Paul powerfully displays the Lord's salvation in Ephesians, which reaches back beyond the physical creation into eternity, displaying God's love and care for the Ephesian believers before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4-5). Paul magnifies this salvation against the backdrop of the spiritually once-dead believers as he contrasts the present reality of spiritual resurrection with the past of carnal living that rendered their lives objects of God's holy wrath. In light of their desperate past, the believers being now spiritually seated in the heavenlies means God has poured out His grace through the powerful work of Christ, who not only defeated death Himself, but raised the Ephesians according to His power and grace when they trusted the Lord by faith. Their lives are redeemed as the masterpiece of God's redemptive work, now created in Christ to serve Him and not the course of the world, Satan, or the flesh (Eph. 2:2-3). Paul's treatise on the involvement of God and the responsibility of man in salvation is abundantly clear.

Ephesians 2:1-3 – The Previous Life

Paul sets man's foundational need of salvation against the background of the past of the once spiritually dead Ephesians through the first three verses. The past-tense verbs through these verses strike the reader and are employed to demonstrate that the realities discussed were true at one time but are not presently applied to the

recipients. The word “dead” (νεκροὺς, from the root νεκρός) means “dead, without life,”¹ and specifically within the context means “dead in alienation from God.”² The due wage for sins and trespasses is a spiritual death which the individual has no power within to overcome. This is a summary concerning the result of a previous life of decided spiritual opposition to God before the intervention of Christ.

Several influences had led to the previous life of the Ephesians: the course of the world (2:2a), the “prince of the power of the air” (2:2b), and fleshly desires (2:3). The result was that they were under the wrath of God; in other words, they were deserving of the just payment of God’s wrath as a result of their decided way of living. Paul employs the word “walked” (περιεπατήσατε) to describe the way, or the manner of life in which the Ephesians were once entrenched. This was not a way of life decided for them, but the trespasses and sins were decided living according to their own desires and impulses. Bock notes, “The figure of the walk is translated in terms of a former way of life.”³ Though this was a way of life, there were certainly the external pressures of the present-day philosophies of the Greek culture, the natural passions and desires of the flesh, and the spiritual power behind it all—Satan.

Ephesians 2:4-7 – Raised to New Life

The main section of the passage (2:4-7) changes course abruptly from the efforts and accomplishments of a life of sin to the merciful and powerful work of God in raising believers to new life through Christ. Cohick asserts that Eph 2:4 “begins with an adversive conjunction ‘but,’ indicating a contrasting idea that recalibrates the previous points.”⁴ Paul provides stark contrast to readjust the reader’s focus from the hopeless state of man under the wrath of

¹ Wesley J. Perschbacher, ed., *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: 2010), 282.

² Ibid.

³ Darrell L. Bock, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 61, ProQuest Ebook Central..

⁴ Lynn H. Cohick *The Letter to the Ephesians, NICNT* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2020), 141, ProQuest Ebook Central..

God because of sin now to the powerful work of Christ able to bring to life that which was once dead spiritually. This powerful work means that believers have been made alive “together with Christ” (2:5), and with two further clarifications of how this has taken place, namely that he has raised up believers in spiritual resurrection and seated them in the heavenlies with Christ (2:6).

What seems to be an emphasis of Paul’s is the power that God has over the principalities of darkness that are responsible for the deception of man. However, not only is this power real in Christ, but it is a reality for believers as well who are seated with Christ. Paul seems to be referring back to Christ’s ultimate power over the wicked forces of darkness (Eph 1:19-23). The Ephesians, well-versed in the occult practices of Greek mythology and temple worship, were aware of the superstitious fear people had regarding the false gods that were worshipped. The reality that they are seated in the heavenlies with Christ would have been, as Arnold states, “an enormously comforting and practical truth for people who have lived in a culture where they feared the spirit powers in their pre-Christian experience. They are now linked in a dynamic union to a powerful and loving Lord, who is superior to all of the forces of evil.”⁵ The superstitions that the Ephesians were well-acquainted with from their previous life held no power over them since they have been seated in the heavenlies with Christ. No power is more powerful than Christ, and there is no force of darkness or evil that could overcome their standing in Him.

Ephesians 2:8-10 – Saved by Grace, Created for Good Works

Paul states unequivocally in v. 8 that salvation itself has its basis in the grace of God. Grace (χάρις) functions as a dative of cause according to Wallace, who states that “the dative of cause indicates the basis”⁶ of a particular verb, indicating that God’s grace is the basis of His merciful redemption and justification of man. Noting the importance of word order in the original, Hoehner observes, “grace...is mentioned first for the sake of emphasis.”⁷ Thus, God’s grace is the basis for the believer’s salvation, and faith is the means by which one receives

⁵ Clinton E. Arnold, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 137.

⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 167.

⁷ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002),

this gift. Erickson notes the nature of faith is the medium man must use to receive this great work of God's mercy, in that "faith is the means of accepting salvation."⁸ Grammatically and theologically this expression of Paul's shows that the basis of salvation is the grace of God, while there lies with man a responsibility to respond and receive the grace through faith. Much debate has centered around what the antecedent of "that" (τοῦτο) refers to, which has great implications. The first prominent interpretation places "faith" as the antecedent of "gift," meaning that faith is the gift of God that cannot be earned. Secondly, others believe "grace" as the gift of God to which "that" points. A third interpretation is that τοῦτο refers to the phrase entirely, thematically stating that salvation as a whole is the gift of God not of the recipient's doing. The most fitting interpretation puts grace as the antecedent, clearly repeating the theme that God's grace is not earned but mercifully given.

Paul further expounds upon the nature of salvation by faith in v. 9, elaborating that it is not by any sort of human effort that one is saved. The phrase οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων is specifically employed by Paul for the predominantly Gentile audience, relating that human works in general will not produce salvation. This is a notable distinction from Paul's other letters with a larger Jewish contingent, where he frequently employs the idea of the "works of the law" not being enough to save.⁹ The more general sense of works would be a more readily accessible concept for the Ephesians to grasp, given their familiarity with the Law given to Israel may have been limited.

The case continues to build with the next verse, and Paul continues to discuss the role of works in salvation. "For" (γάρ) directs focus back to v. 8, that salvation is according to God's grace and not man's works. Paul's emphasis is that salvation is the pinnacle of God's work in Christ Jesus and has little to do with what man accomplishes. Salvation is God's accomplishment, not man's, as established in vss. 8-9. "Workmanship" (ποίημα) is only used one other time in the New Testament in Rom 1:20, describing God's character seen in the created world ("in the things that have been made", ESV), and it is generally used to mean, "that which has been made; a work; of

340.

⁸Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 937.

⁹ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, vol. 42, *World Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 112.

the works of God as creator.”¹⁰ Paul cleverly describes the regenerating work of Christ in salvation as God’s pinnacle in the creative order; far above the wonders of the creatures of the earth, greater than the magnitude of the oceans, more vast than the expanse of the universe is God’s work in the resurrection of once-dead-in-sins believers. The NLT renders this word as, “God’s masterpiece”, and the ESV as “workmanship.” Either translation is adequate, but the NLT’s rendering brings in a stronger essence of God’s masterful working in salvation.

This new creation of believers by God in Christ is “for good works” (Eph. 2:10, ESV), the preposition “for” (ἐπὶ) indicates purpose for the newly created life in Christ. This new purpose contrasts with the previous works of the flesh and mind, characteristic of the life before Christ (Eph. 2:1-3). “Since salvation is seen as a creation in Christ for good works, such works cannot be the cause of their salvation.”¹¹ Paul states in no uncertain terms, using the power of repetition, that works of man are not what saves; however, God saves and gives divine purpose for believers to walk in good works. The new life in Christ is full of good works.

Conclusion

Through this passage, the life characterized by the old works of the flesh are a distant memory in contrast to the strong working of God’s grace in salvation which has transformed the believer. Paul says that God’s merciful intervention through Christ has saved the believers, and they received the blessings of salvation through faith. While good works are not what saves, they are a purpose for which believers are created anew in Christ. These good works are indications of, not merits for, the powerful resurrecting work of Christ in the believer’s life.

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¹⁰ James Strong, [*Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon*](#) (Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1995).

¹¹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 113.

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